Comedy, drama, romance at film fest

The linep for the Lavender Film Festival:

■ THURSDAY

8 p.m.: "Friends and Family" B+ — This mobster comedy gleefully Uzis holes in every gender stereotype you can imagine, starting with the idea that gay men are sissies. Gay lovers Stephen (Greg Lauren) and Danny (Christopher Gartin) are the impeccably dressed strong-arm enforcers for a New York City mob family.

When Stephen's parents, who know their son is gay but not that he's a wiseguy, decide to drop in for a visit, their tough-and-macho comrades in arms must pose as flaming caterers. It turns out to be a hilarious twist on "La Cage Aux Folles" or "Birdcage." (Preceded by the shorts "Sexy" and "Going West.")

■ FRIDAY

3:30 p.m.: "The Journey to Kafiristan" B- — This poetic German lesbian road movie drives a slow but often interesting course through the lives of author Annemarie Schwarzenbach and ethnologist Ella Maillart. On the eve of World War II, the two women travel through the Balkans, Turkey and Persia, discovering a world as exotic and perilous as their own relationship. (German with English subtitles.) (Preceded by the short "Roberta Loved.")

6 p.m.: "Hush!" C — This plodding Japanese drama captures the mundane aspects of gay life without saying anything interesting about them. a gay-pride parade with a banner that reads, "Ask me about my single lesbian daughter," I almost spit out my lox and bagels. (Preceded by the short "Breaking Up Really Sucks.")

the details

Lavender Film Festival

WHAT: A four-day celebration of gay, lesbian and transgender films

WHEN: Opens Thursday and runs through Sept. 8.

WHERE: Fine Arts Center, 30 W. Dale St.

COST: $75 for tickets to all 27 films, $20 for Thursday or Friday only, $25 for Saturday or Sunday. Tickets for individual films are $8. (Some discounts are available for low-income festivalgoers.) To order, call 386-6843 or visit www.pplff.org.

■ SATURDAY

11 a.m.: "Markova: Comfort Gay" B- — You may have heard about the Filipino sex slaves taken by the Japanese during World War II. But not many have heard the story of Walter Dempster Jr., a k a Markova, a gay cross-dresser.

This fictionalized version of Markova's tale introduces us to a delightful man in his twilight years who recounts a tragic, harrowing story of gay men who knew torture and abuse as a way of life. (In Tagalog with English subtitles. Preceded by the short "Sweet Thing.")

1:45 p.m.: "By Hook or by Crook" C+ — Imagine "Boys Don't Cry" without the political wallop. You end up with a gritty character-driven story with-

But when he has a fling with a young waiter, the two men don't use condoms, believing their passion is so great it will protect them from consequences. (Italian with English subtitles. Preceded by the short "Lost Cause.")

6:30 p.m.: "Guardian of the Frontier" (not available for review) — The first Slovenian feature film directed by a woman (Maja Weiss), this fantasy adventure follows three young women on a canoe trip between Slovenia and Croatia as they explore the border between the acceptable and the taboo. (In Slovenian with English subtitles. Preceded by the short "Selma & Sophie")

9 p.m.: "The Trip" B+ — Think of this as a gay version of "When Harry Met Sally" (or is that "When Harry Met Sal"?)

"The Trip" is one of those on-again, off-again romance comedy/dramas that spans several eras.

from the Rocky Mountain Women's Film Festival.

But with the Lavender festival falling on Rosh Hashanah weekend, this is a smart choice. It looks at how gay men and lesbians who are Orthodox Jews strain to resolve their theology and sexual orientation.

It might have been more potent if the filmmakers had focused on just one or two, rather than trying for a plethora of voices. (Preceded by the short "Just a Woman.")

1 p.m.: Filmmakers forum

2:30 p.m.: "Fish and Elephant" (Not available for preview) — The first lesbian film produced in China, this underground film is about lesbian life in Beijing. (Mandarian with English subtitles. Preceded by the short "The 10 Rules.")

5 p.m.: "A.K.A. Lies Are Like Wishes" C+ — I liked "Time Code," the experimental indie film that divided the screen into four frames, each shown in real time. The device may be annoying, but at least the film had the good sense to make fun of its pretentions.

"A.K.A," a new British import, follows "Time Code" as if it were a manifesto. The story about a disaffected young gay guy trying to escape from an abusive family and find his place in society probably would have been fine as a more conventional film.

But splitting the screen into three sections just distracts from the story by dividing our attentions. (Preceded

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6 p.m.: "Hush!" C — This plodding Japanese drama captures the mundane aspects of gay life without saying anything interesting about them. It's hard to get too emotionally involved with the closeted Katsuhiro (Seiichi Tanabe) and his family troubles, but his job is fascinating: testing model boats in a simulated ocean. If only there were more work, less love-life/family angst . . . (Japanese with English subtitles.) (Preceded by the short "The Parlor.")

9 p.m.: "A Family Affair" A- — If Woody Allen were a lesbian, this is the kind of hilarious screwball culture-clash of a film he'd make.

It's about a brainy New York Jew (Helen Lesnick, who also wrote and directed the film) who's looking for "Ms. Rightowitz," but instead falls for a beautiful California WASP (Erica Shaffer).

When her mom marches in a gay-pride parade with a banner that reads, "Ask me about my single lesbian daughter," I almost spit out my lox and bagels. (Preceded by the short "Breaking Up Really Sucks.")

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1:45 p.m.: "By Hook or by Crook" C+ — Imagine "Boys Don't Cry" without the political wallop. You end up with a gritty character-driven story without a point. "By Hook" is a rough-styled indie film about lesbian drifters that meanders through 98 minutes and then rolls credits.

The bright spot is up-and-coming-actress Harriet Dodge, who plays a wild, emotional dervish and perpetual victim named Valentine. (Preceded by the short "Sorry Brenda.")

4 p.m.: "Days" B — This brooding Italian relationship drama drags at times, but its raw sense of reality is so vivid that it effectively draws us inside the private life of a young gay banker who has AIDS. Claudio (Thomas Trabacchi) goes to his checkups, takes his medications and lives a measured existence with a stable longtime partner.

But when he has a fling with a young waiter, the two men don't use condoms, believing their passion is so great it will protect them from consequences. (Italian with English subtitles. Preceded by the short "Lost Cause.")

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"The Trip" is one of those on-again, off-again romance comedy/dramas that spans several eras.

When we meet Alan (Larry Sullivan) in the early '70s, he's a sexually repressed young Republican journalist working on a story about homosexuality. Tommy (Steve Braun), a liberal gay-rights activist, teaches him all about gay life, much to the chagrin of Alan's ditzy girlfriend.

The '80s and '90s see the two in and out of love and bed as they go through strange politics and even stranger hairstyles. (Preceded by the shorts "Rick and Steve 3" and "Rick and Steve 4.")

■ **SUNDAY**

11 a.m.: "Trembling Before G_D" B — This documentary seems like the kind of heavy subject probe we've come to expect from the Rocky Mountain Women's Film Festival.

But with the Lavender festival falling on Rosh Hashanah weekend, this is a smart choice. It looks at how gay men and lesbians who are Orthodox Jews strain to resolve their theology and sexual orientation.

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But splitting the screen into three sections just distracts from the story by dividing our attentions. (Preceded by the short "How They Get Us To Screw Ourselves.")

8 p.m.: "Karmen Gei" B+ — This lyrical Senegalese retelling of the opera "Carmen" is the most sensually shot film of the festival.

Though confusing at times, I appreciated the authentic feel of the movie and the way the characters use dance and music as a weapon against political oppression.

But mostly I found myself beguiled by star Djeinaba Diop Gai, a charismatic beauty who seduces her female prison warden as easily as she seduces the male government officials. (In French and Wolof with English subtitles. Preceded by the shorts "Ere Mela Mela" and "Tango.")

Warren Epstein

Lavender Film Festival assembles most ambitious schedule yet

By Warren Epstein
The Gazette

The logistics of putting together a film festival can be daunting enough without anger and heartbreak thrown into the mix.

The unsolved killing of KRCC DJ Jocelyn Sandberg, who was a guiding force behind the Lavender Film Festival, has turned the planning of this third annual gay and lesbian celebration into a trying emotional tribute.

"I have deep admiration for the committee for being able to pull together and continue, carrying forward the love Jocelyn had for the festival, but it's been hard," says Alma Cremonesi, the festival coordinator. Even without the emotional challenges, this would have been a tough festival to produce.

For one thing, it's been expanded from three to four days, adding films Thursday night. The festival, which kicks off Thursday at the Fine Arts Center, will showcase 13 feature films and 15 shorts from more than a dozen countries, all dealing with gay, lesbian or transgender issues.

This will be the first year it will host filmmakers for a forum, which is scheduled for 1 p.m. Sunday, to discuss their works.

Lavender Film Festival movie reviews LIFE 4

The feature films this year continue to reflect the freedom that goes along with such a relatively new genre. Filmmakers interject gay twists into a mob comedy and end up with something new. They retread the street-kids flick, a brooding French relationship drama and even a famous opera, and find fresh territories to explore. There's much to savor and enjoy.

California Newsreel

Djeinaba Diop Gai is Karmen in Joseph Gai Ramaka's "Karmen Gei."